

## Archie Mafeje: The Local and the Universal

In his address to the National Research Foundation in South Africa in May 2001 on 'The Impact of Social Sciences on Development and Democracy: A Positivist Illusion', Archie Mafeje made this point:

Some social philosophers believe that the universal is contained in the local. This is only true, if the local is universally recognised. The so-called African renaissance is not universally recognised. Its intellectual representations are wanting and its political determinations are in question. This raises two questions: i) the indigenisation of knowledge in Africa; and ii) the political significance of Africanity or the so-called African renaissance. Both of these questions are not popular in white South Africa and the West in general. In their immediate connotations these signify nothing more than an assertion of a new self-identity. It is inevitably that any identity emerges as an opposed category to another/others. Likewise, it is inevitably that the assertion of any identity provokes equally subjective/ideological revulsions from whatever is perceived as alterity.<sup>1</sup>

Mafeje here was taking issue with the 'illusion' of positivism in social sciences in favour of a 'normative social science, that is, a social science that does not only acknowledge the fact that it is not "value-free" but is willing to confront and objectify social and moral issues such as poverty, racism, and globalisation'. However, the dialect of and the tension between the local and universal, or the self and the other that he describes in the citation above somehow explain how he was received in his country, South Africa, on his return from exile.

Jimi Adesina, in one of the tributes to Mafeje, recounts how 'in our last conversation he [Mafeje] spoke of his isolation and loneliness in South Africa (at home, in a place of his birth, in a land that gave us one of the finest minds in the global community of the social sciences)'. And this, indeed, is one of the themes that emerged from speeches by friends and relatives at a memorial service held in his honour at the University of South Africa

**Eddy Maloka**  
NEPAD Secretariat  
Pretoria, South Africa

(UNISA), which took place in the Transkei a few days leading to his funeral.

In his widely disseminated tribute to Mafeje, Pallo Jordan, South Africa's Minister of Arts and Culture, recalls that Mafeje 'described himself as South African by birth, Dutch by citizenship, and Egyptian by domicile. His return to the Motherland was intended to not only fuse these into one but spend the last years of his life as a living example of African cosmopolitanism'.<sup>2</sup> Another observer described Mafeje as a 'straight-shooting Afrocentric critic of colonial anthropology and distortions of Africa in western academies... [his] work is not well known among younger scholars and is not as widely circulated in western venues as it deserves'.<sup>3</sup> Mahmood Mamdani concurs: 'The important point is to memorialize the meaning of his life and work in a way that makes it accessible to the younger generation, those who did not have the opportunity to know him personally as we did'.

When I persuaded Mafeje to return 'home' some few years ago, the intention was, among others, to bring his intellectual influence and the respect he commanded on the continent and internationally, closer to his home front. We had hoped he would dedicate whatever strength was still left in his body and mind to collate his work for publication and dissemination. This is a daunting task that is yet to be accomplished.

I was also hoping that Mafeje's return 'home' would inject more energy and, perhaps, even direction, in the ongoing debate about the role and contribution of black intellectuals in the post-apartheid transition. This debate is in three related areas. Firstly, is the concern over the fact that public discourse in post-apartheid South Africa is largely dominated, shaped and led by those who were historically privileged in the past because of the colour of their skin. Indeed, at its 52nd national conference of December 2007, the

ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), deliberated on this challenge under the topic: 'Communications and the Battle of Ideas'. One of the resolutions adopted at the conference in this regard committed the party to 'vigorously communicate the ANC's outlook and values (developmental state, collective rights, values of caring and community solidarity, ubuntu, non-sexism, etc.) versus the current mainstream media's ideological outlook (neo-liberalism, a weak and passive state, and overemphasis on individual rights, market fundamentalism, etc.)', and 'that the battle of ideas must be conducted in deeds not only in theory and these deeds must find practical expression through the ANC structures'. Accordingly, the party's mouthpiece, *ANC Today*, subsequently carried a lead article with the title: 'The Voice of the ANC Must Be Heard'!

The second area of the debate is about the virtual absence of black intelligentsia in the country. Pitika Ntuli painted a disturbing picture:

In South Africa, with the advent of the new dispensation, intellectuals were induced from academe into government to function as bureaucrats. Those who felt constrained there were in turn induced into the corporate world. In both these new homes they find their voices circumscribed by the logic of survival. There were those who went the NGO route, but even there they found that if they spoke out they would not receive state funding. Some sought other means of contributing to the broader society: they sought funding from international agencies, but this brought new problems; they were accused of collaborating with enemies of the state or were used by these agencies to subvert our new democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, for Ebrahim Harvey,

alongside the decline of civil society we have seen the decline in black intellectual production. There is a resulting dearth of independent and committed black intellectuals. So discourse in every field continues overwhelmingly to be dominated by white academics and intellectuals.<sup>5</sup>

And finally, there is a tendency in the white intellectual and opinion-making establishment to deny the currency and significance of ‘race’ in South Africa today because, they argue, apartheid is dead! What matters now is, for the white Marxist Left, ‘class’ or, for most, the fear of being overwhelmed by an all-powerful ANC. When some black intellectuals organised themselves into a Native Club in 2006, this was dismissed in the media and other public fora; others even comparing the club to the ‘Broederbond’ of the Afrikaner nationalists during apartheid. Recently, some black journalists convened a Forum for Black Journalists, and this also led to outrage in the white opinion-making establishment, with some white journalists even gate-crashing into a meeting of the forum to play heroes and martyrs for ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom of speech and association’. The argument was, as in the case of the Native Club, that it is racist for blacks to organise themselves into exclusive or, as they put it, ‘apartheid-type’ organisations. Yet many public spaces in the country, including organisations, remain exclusively white because of structural constraints and impediments to access and entry for blacks, thanks to the impact of centuries of colonial rule.

Unfortunately, Mafeje could not fit in and find his way into this debate. His towering intellectual stature and his ‘straight-shooting’ approach could have helped make the case for a very vibrant, strong and independent black intelligentsia as a force to reckon with in confronting the enduring legacy of apartheid. His age was, to be fair, taking a heavy toll on him.

Perhaps, another factor that contributed to Mafeje’s loneliness on his return ‘home’ was the fact that he was never an active part of the liberation movement establishment. Jordan makes this point in his tribute to Mafeje:

Though he was a keen supporter of African liberation, from his days as a student at [University of Cape Town] UCT, Archie Mafeje was always extremely sceptical of national liberation movements. He immersed himself in the study of the anti-colonial nationalist movements across sub-Saharan Africa. He withheld his support from all the liberation movements in South Africa, and even after 1994 he sounded doubtful about returning home to South Africa, preferring to attach himself to the newly established

Multidisciplinary Research Centre at the University of Namibia, as director. It took the efforts of his old friends and colleagues at UCT to persuade him to apply for a post at the University of South Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, for Mafeje,

governments determine the options for ‘development’ but they are not the source of all wisdom, as every social philosopher or social scientist would agree. Critique is the ultimate commitment of all good social scientists. Tendentious social science is not only a confirmation of the status quo but is also anti-intellectual and, therefore, detrimental to human/social development. Critical social science insights are indispensable for social development and enlightened governance.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, when the South African Left debated the future of socialism in the early 1990s in the wake of Joe Slovo’s ‘Has Socialism Failed?’ , Mafeje joined in the fray with his ‘The Bathos of Tendentious Historiography’ . Mafeje informed, as it were, by the belief that Slovo was ‘a confirmed Stalinist until the writing of the essay under review’ , argued that the South African Communist Party (SACP) was formed by ‘white émigré communists [who] depended to a very large extent on the Soviet Union and had virtually no constituency inside the country’ . For him, the Party ‘succeeded in splitting the black national movement right in the middle for its own purposes. Having lost any support of white workers ...it sought a constituency within the black national movement *without giving up its privileged position*, as a “vanguard party” ’ [emphasis in the original]. Thus, concluded Mafeje, ‘... had it not been for its [SACP’s] self-interested interference, a number of differences, say, between the Unity Movement and the ANC, and between the ANC and the PAC could have been resolved’ .<sup>8</sup>

In his survey of the ‘Has Socialism Failed?’ debate, Pallo Jordan observed at the time that

Mafeje unfortunately did not engage with Slovo, choosing instead to scold the SACP and its ally, the ANC, about the policies they are pursuing to bring down apartheid. Although ...Mafeje could have made a number of valid points, these got lost because of the Africanist stance he adopted. This

was unfortunate because South African Marxism has an extremely underdeveloped theoretical tradition to which Mafeje might have made a more substantial contribution if he had contained his bad temper. In this instance his eagerness to settle accounts with ideological opponents got the better of him.<sup>9</sup>

Mafeje may have not had the impact we all had hoped for on his return ‘home’ from exile, but perhaps it was because he was a living expression of the dialect of the local and the universal; an African living without borders, be they geographic or intellectual. He may have not been one of the commissars in the trenches of the liberation movement for fear of being constrained by ‘borders’ negotiating the dialectic of the local and the universal, but he was without doubt one of the pioneers of the knowledge that we are armed with today in our struggle for the total liberation of our continent.

But Mafeje could change lives also, and even transport them from the local to the beyond of the universal, like that of Ken Hughes, now with the Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics at UCT, who was among the 200-odd students who staged a sit-in at that university in 1968 to protest the ‘Mafeje incident’ . For Hughes:

The UCT sit-in of 1968 was a landmark event, both for the university and for those who took part in it. Several people for whom it was a formative experience are still around...In my case it was the start of a peculiar career as an international student agitator – for I went from UCT to the University of Warwick in England, where general grievances resulted in occupying the Registry, and then on to MIT in the US, where we sat in protest against the Vietnam War.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. Archie Mafeje, ‘The Impact of Social Sciences on Development and Democracy: A Positivist Illusion’ , Address to the National Research Foundation, 31 May 2001.
2. Pallo Jordan, ‘Statement on the Passing of Professor Archie Mafeje by Minister of Arts & Culture’ , 4 April 2007.
3. ‘Celebrated African Anthropologist Archie Mafeje is Dead’ , *AfrikaNews.org*, 1 April 2007.
4. Pitika Ntuli, ‘We Need Real Intellectual to ask the Right Questions’ , *Sunday Times*, 27 January 2008.



5. Ebrahim Harvey, 'South Africa: Where are the Black Thinkers of the Left?' , *Online Mail and Guardian*, 5 May 2006.
6. Jordan, 'Statement on the Passing of Professor Archie Mafeje by Minister of Arts & Culture' .
7. Mafeje, ' The Impact of Social Sciences on Development and Democracy' .
8. Mafeje, ' The Bathos of Tendentious Historiography: A Review of Joe Slovo' s " Has Socialism Failed?" " , *SAPES*, vol. 3, no. 11 August 1990.
9. Pallo Jordan, ' A Survey of the South African Debate on the Decline of Socialism in Eastern Europe' , South African Communist Party, 1991 [see SACP website].
10. *UCT Monday Paper*, vol. 26.05, 23 April 2007.